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SONDERN VERSUS ABER; SINO(QUE) VERSUS PERO

By JOHN A. HESS

STUDENTS of German or of Spanish are always perplexed about a proper rendition of the English conjunction *but*. I believe the trouble is due to the rules usually given. The following rules taken from widely used German and Spanish grammars are typical.

"*Sondern* is used only after a negative, and introduces a contrast which excludes or contradicts what goes before."

"*Sondern* in asserting its own clause also emphatically contradicts or corrects the preceding clause, the two clauses being represented as mutually exclusive."

"Two ideas absolutely excluding one another are contrasted by *sondern*, hence *sondern* can be used only after a negative; two ideas forming a contrast, but not absolutely excluding one another, are contrasted by *aber*."

"*Sondern* is only used after a negative, and introduces a contradictory statement, while *aber*, which is used after either an affirmative or negative proposition, concedes the statement of the first proposition, and introduces a limitation or a contrast."

"*Sino* is used only to introduce a positive idea in direct contrast to a preceding negative, and in this case the preceding verb is understood and not repeated. If there is a different verb in the second part of the negation, 'but' is translated by *sino que*."

"*Sino* is used only after a negative clause and introduces a reinforcing or contrasting affirmation with the verb omitted."

"*Sino* is used after a negative statement that is offset by an affirmative statement."

These last two definitions seem to me to be much more satisfactory than *all* the preceding ones. Let us consider, however, the following sentences in order to determine, if possible, the value of the above rules.

1. The man is not rich, but poor.

Der Mann ist nicht reich, sondern arm.

El hombre no es rico, sino pobre.

2. The man is not merely rich, but also generous.
Der Mann ist nicht nur reich, sondern auch freigebig.
El hombre no es solamente rico, sino generoso también.
3. This man never works, but spends all his time dancing.
Dieser Mann arbeitet nie, sondern er verbringt seine ganze
Zeit im Tanzen.
Este hombre no trabaja nunca, sino que pasa todo su tiempo
bailando.
4. This man is not rich, but he gives money to the poor.
Dieser Mann ist nicht reich, aber er gibt den Armen Geld.
Este hombre no es rico, pero da dinero a los pobres.
5. She is not very beautiful, but good.
Sie ist nicht sehr schön, aber gut.
Ella no es muy hermosa, pero buena sí.

Let us consider now these sentences in the light of the first rules stated. Does the fact that a man is *poor* contradict or exclude the fact *that he is not rich*? Are the two parts of the sentence mutually exclusive? Does the idea that a man is *not merely rich* preclude the thought that he is *also generous*? The statement that a man *spends all his time dancing* hardly seems to me to contradict the assertion that he *never works*. On the contrary, in sentences 1 to 3, the second part of the sentence *replaces* or *supplants* what is stated as a negative truth in the first part by something positive and specific, rather than *contradicts* it. What these grammarians probably meant was that the idea contained in the *verb*, *predicate adjective* or *predicate noun* of the first part, considered *exclusive of the negative particle*, is contradicted or corrected in the second part, but this is not evident from their statement of the rule. In sentences 4 and 5 there is no such *supplanting* or *affirmative restatement*. The second part merely adds *supplementary information*.

My pupils have always found a rule which I formulated adequate and easy of comprehension. I give it in the hope that it will prove useful to others:

When that which is merely stated negatively in the first part of a sentence is replaced (supplanted) by something positive and specific in the second, the conjunction *but* is translated by *sondern* [*sino* (*que*)]. If the second part merely adds supplementary information, *aber* [*pero*] is used.

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